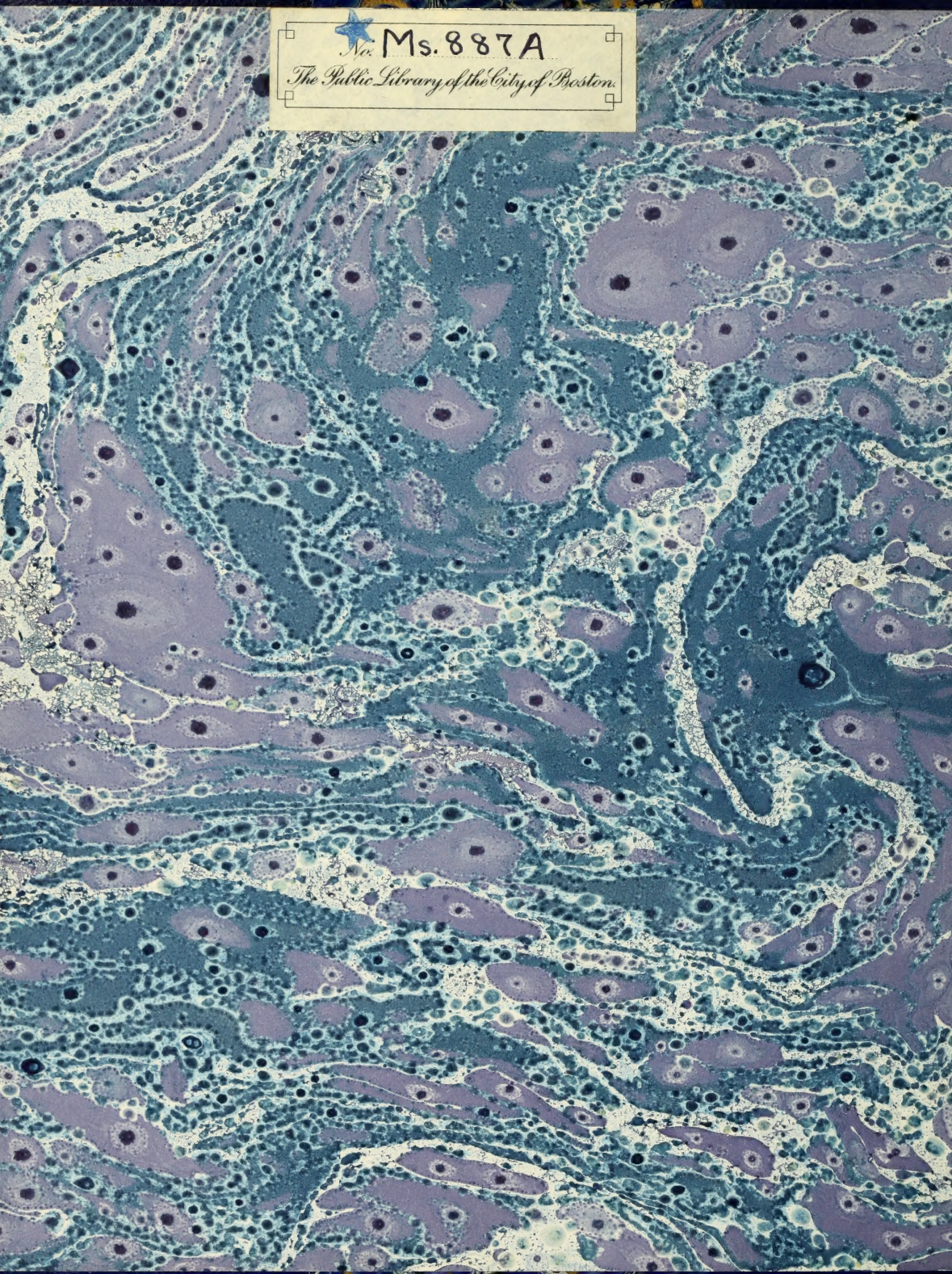
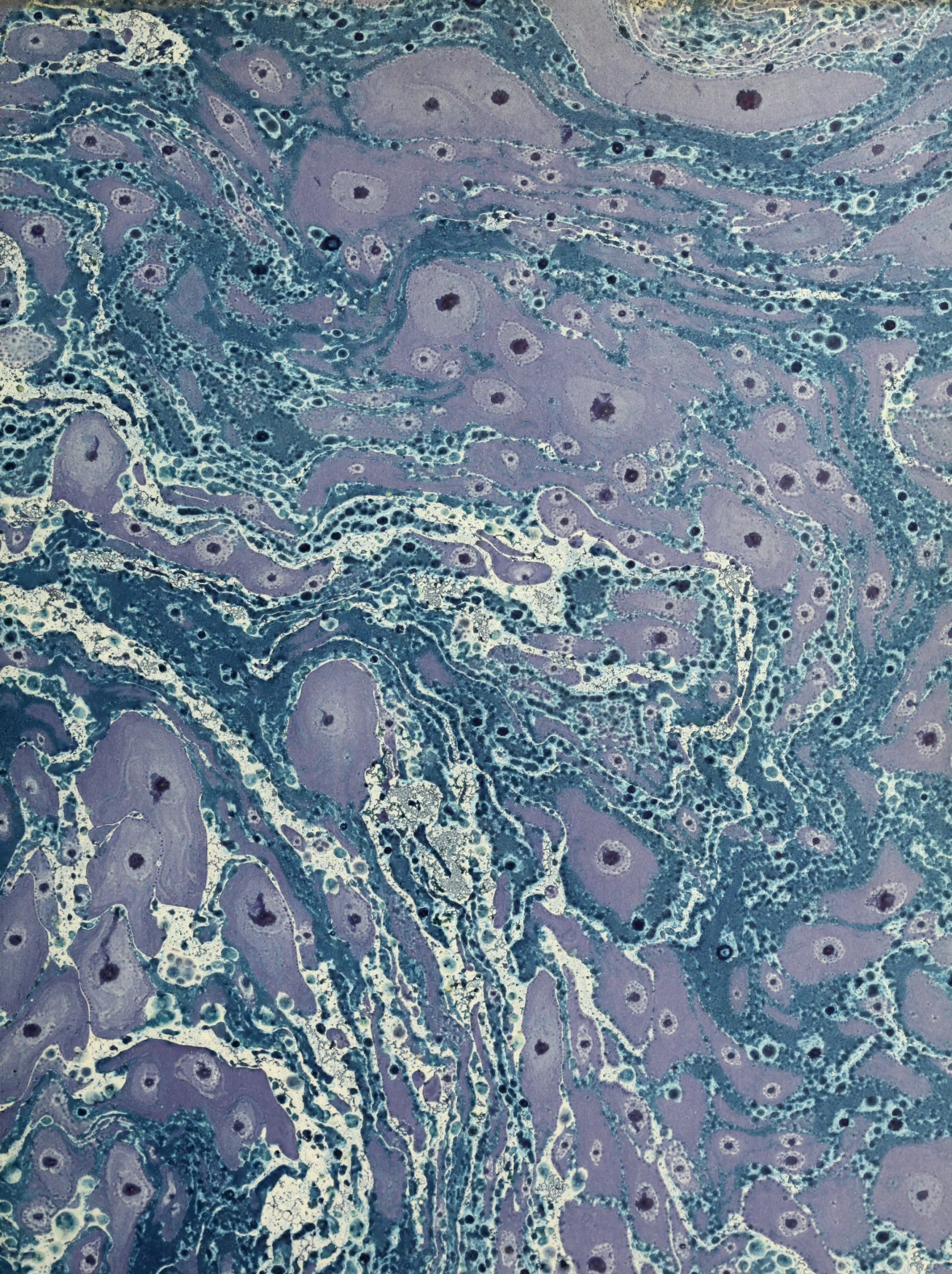




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John Billington,  
the Plymouth Martyr.  
Edited by Geo. Prince.  
1902.

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For a period of more than two hundred and seventy years, one of the kindest - most humane and benevolent Pilgrims of the celebrated ship "May Flower" has borne a weight of obloquy such as few men in the world have been forced to endure. Not only his memory is slandered, but that of his children, and grand children assailed all these centuries!

To be censured and defamed, to be misjudged and slandered is the common lot of humanity, Aristides the just was ostracised! "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless millions mourn".

That honest old John Billington, one of the most wealthy, industrious, and active members of that little "May Flower" colony should have been envied by some is not a matter of great surprise, but the hostility exhibited is inexcusable.

The following incident is thought to have



been its beginning. While a party from the  
 "May Flower" at Cape Cod was exploring the  
 coast Nov. 1620 they came to a snare set by  
 the Indians; young Bradford being careless  
 sprung the trap, and was jerked up by the heels  
 into the air. Here he hung suspended, amidst  
 the convulsive laughter of his companions, as  
 they witnessed the comical contortions, gyrations,  
 and gymnastic exercises of this aerial display! Is  
 it strange that even those staid and sober Pilgrims  
 should choke with laughter at the grotesque exhibit;  
 or that the old hunter Billington, after releasing  
 him, should have rolled over and over on the  
 ground, almost bursting with efforts to suppress  
 his mirth? It was then and there that the spark  
 of anger and hatred was kindled, and the <sup>continued</sup> flame,  
 for ten long years - yea, until his manuscript was  
 finished - and perhaps until his death.



The clearer understanding of the charges & case against John Billington is greatly enlight-  
 -end by the recent developements and investigations. Errors have been discovered, and important truths disclosed that should put an end to the repetition of those errors and misstatements. Those who glut their <sup>ire in</sup> defaming both the quick and the dead in romances or sensational histories, probably can never be reached.

The object of the writer of these pages is to cor-  
 -rect and preserve the facts in relation to the fate of an innocent man. To write them down in a plain descriptive manner for the benefit of history and truth.

There is no remedy for the abuse of the dead: no process of law for the punishment of posthumous libel. But are there no steps which can be taken to vin-  
 -dicate a reputation and expose a libel of near three centuries ago, or of a romancer of a later date?



16  
The light of the present day is instructive  
as showing how little of the Element of real his-  
-tory has existed in the past.

John Billington, his wife and two sons,  
John & Francis, with guns and numerous  
hunting implements, casks of powder & shot,  
trunks, furniture and all the other outfits  
of a well-to-do emigrant to the new world,  
joined ~~joined~~ the passengers of the "May Flower"  
at the same time with Richard Warren, Stephen  
Hopkins, Edward Dorton and others of London;  
and yet Bradford says, "he was smuggled aboard!"  
If so, why was he not put on shore when the  
two vessels turned back again to port, with  
disabled "Speedwell"? Note what Bradford  
writes about sending back a part of the passengers  
when he was not at all thinking about Billington;  
"So after they had taken out such provisions





[from the "Spredwell"] as ye other ship could well  
 stow, and concluded what number, and what  
persons to send back, they made another sad  
 parting se". That smuggling story of Bradfords  
 will not bear the light, and must be reckoned with  
 the other unfounded aspersions derogatory to  
 Billington - He says in another place "Billington  
 was a profane man". There was a law against  
 profanity, yet there is no account of his ever  
 having been accused of breaking that or any  
 other law! If he did indeed in some of his con-  
 =tentious with Bradford use that objectionable word  
 that once upon a time escaped good old Uncle Toby,  
 a charitable heart will wish that it also would be  
 blotted from the record in Heavens Chancery by  
 angels tears. We will leave it with a higher  
 court than Bradfords to decide.

Let us look for a moment at Billington during



That terrible sickness and death that took off half  
 their little band of 102. There were only seven of  
 them that were able to help the suffering and dying,  
 Billington alone furnished them food from the woods  
 and meadows, and fish from the sea - cooked it for  
 them, nursed them, and buried them when life depart-  
 ed from them. It is almost safe to say that to  
 him and his boys, we, their descendants, owe the  
 lives of the survivors; for, without food they would  
 all have perished with hunger that hurried the disease.  
 Billington was the only one who had the skill and  
 the implements for hunting and fishing. To him  
 and his fishing boat were the colony indebted for the  
 food obtained from the English fishermen at Monhogan,  
 and the St Georges islands in Maine. It was probably  
 at that time he discovered at Richmonds island, Me.  
 the valuable stone spoken of by Thomas Morton,  
 which was coveted by Bradford and others.



Very many of the charges against Billington made by historians of later days are not only unfounded but extremely ridiculous. Hubbard, who wrote in 1680, uses these words "The murderor expected that, for want of people to increase the plantation, he should have his life spared!"

Hubbard's conclusion is stupid enough. Old Billington and his wife had long passed the age when hopes of an increase to the population could be expected from them, yet this reductio ad absurdum is seriously asserted. For making mountains out of very small mole-hills, the revilers of the Billingtons are very peculiar. Bradford writes, and his disciples have repeated, "that John Billington, one of Francis Billington's sons, [another of Bradford's errors, it was Francis' brother, John] made powder squibs; the burning of which frightened the women. This act is described as a great wickedness inherited from



his wicked father! If the parents of now-a-days  
 should be blamed for such boyish pranks, there are but  
 few of us would escape censure. We again find the  
 following incident blindly told by Bradford. "One  
 John Billington was adjudged to be tied by the neck  
 " and heels for disrespect to the captain." It is hard to  
 believe that Bradford wrote this intentionally in such  
 brief uncertain manner in order that <sup>it might</sup> be interpreted  
 as referring to Old John Billington, yet the ambiguity  
 is suggestive, and it has been so interpreted by many writers.

The "John Billington" so vaguely mentioned, was the  
 boy John Jr that fired the squibs, and the "Captain", was  
 Capt Jones of the "Mayflower", not Capt Standish, with  
 whom the boy was a great favorite. Capt Standish and  
 Old Billington were ever fast friends - They stood shoulder  
 to shoulder in all dangers, they were the only two who  
 possessed "snaphances" the others were armed with match-locks.  
 In the punishment above named, it was the father of the





boy who threatened the punishment, but Capt. Jones condoned the offence, begging the father not to punish the lad, and on his begging pardon all was forgiven; and should have been forgotten. The application of such a punishment to the old truster would have been similar to the attempt of the mice to bell the cat!

The only misdoing recorded against any of the Billingtons was that of Francis, who at one time was caught smoking. He paid his fine and that was the end of it.

These trivial acts are dwelt upon with grave and elaborate specifications, ingenious and insidious allusions for a purpose, which I think the reader will readily understand. The scraping together, and parading such insignificant charges; the grasping at such straws must convince most minds that weightier reasons were wanting. It is a sad sad business to contemplate.



Together with his muscular strength-agility and courage, Willingdon's active out door life had filled him with the sunshine of love kindness, and manhood, that impelled him to help the helpless, and do those acts of loving kindness and tender nursing which saved the little colony from destruction. Could such an angel of mercy be also a cowardly assassin? A thousand times NO! He was one of those who live, not for their own sake alone, but for others. He was bold and fearless in danger, always ready to lend a helping hand. It was a pleasure to him to convey Winslow in his fishing-boat to the Somerset fishermen in Maine, in order to obtain food for the starving: and thought not of the promise "in as much", although the birds were singing that anthem in the air.

Most writers have been content to repeat the prejudiced statements of Bradford without



any critical examination of their absurdities & contradictions, and where inharmonies were encountered have exercised their ingenuity to cover <sup>them</sup> with more freedom than discretion. Their imbibed prejudices make it easy & delightful to invent any thing defamatory; this propensity has caused them to disagree, or <sup>shows</sup> at least that the story was not all told by Bradford.

James Savage Pres. of the Mass. Historical Society in his publication of Gov. Winthrop's Journal 1853 p 43. Says "Of John Billington and the circumstances of his case it is remarkable that no mention is made in Mourtons' New England Memorial though written with special reference to the first colony."

Doctor Samuel Fuller who was in Boston about the time of the Execution makes no mention of the subject in his letters. This secrecy of the particulars and facts of the Tragedy is explained by Mr. George C. Burgess on page 29



Charles Francis Adams in his "Three episodes of Massachusetts history" pg 348 says: "they carried the great body of the law, especially, criminal law locked up in their own breasts, they were at once law makers, law expounders, and the executioners of the law. In the same breath as it were, they declared the crime, condemned the accused, & inflicted the penalty. He also quotes Hutchinson state papers 205 to the same effect.

The New England Register vol 2 p 240. reads: "Previous to the year 1636 there is but a meager record of the political or civil history of the colony. Prior to that year they can hardly be said to have established a civil government. They were a voluntary association of individuals, ruled by the majority and not by fixed laws. The only magistrates were the Governor and assistants. The office of Justice of the peace was unknown.





Yet Bradford says that Billington "was tried and found guilty by both grand and petit jury". Even if there had been any such thing as a jury, they were not needed in this case, for no defence was made. Billington admitted the unfortunate shot, and was in great distress at its result.

Edward Arber F.S.A. in his late work, "The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers" (1897) says: "What a strange thing it is that hitherto there does not exist any adequate account systematically written of the Pilgrim Fathers. The writings of Bradford, Winslow, Cushman &c are in their nature nothing but ex-parte statements, neither do they cover the whole story. Some day the Pilgrim story will become the story of a poet's song - it contains every possible dramatic element; nobleness & baseness, bravery and cowardice, purity and impurity of life, manhood & hypocrisy, gentleness & wrong headedness.



"The Plymouth Church had no minister. It was essentially  
 a church of laymen, and in that respect anticipates  
 the Quakers. At any rate as long as Bradford lived: no  
 minister even dared to aspire to lead them as Robinson  
 had done; therefore as an example of a perfect eccles-  
 iastical organization the Pilgrim Church is simply  
 no-where. It was a national Church governing the whole country."

On page 172 referring to Bradford's panegyric of the  
 Church order, he says "After what has gone before, the  
 reader cannot accept this rose-colored description,  
 written in 1648 some 30 years after the affair"

On page 303 he notices other of Bradford's "Slips of Memory".

On page 173 he gives a case of Bradford's self-laudation  
 where he <sup>Bradford</sup> writes, "The Church had three able deacons."

"The deacons were Dr Samuel Fuller, John Combs, & Mr Bradford!"

The story of the Billington & Newcomin transaction, as  
 the family tradition has it, is thus briefly told. Billington  
 had noticed the frequent disturbance of his traps, and <sup>while</sup> ~~one~~



visiting them early one morning, found the stranger, Newcomin, red-handed stealing the game entrapped. The rogue beat a hasty retreat, dodging from tree to tree with Billington in pursuit, who, when seeing the villain hid behind a tree and safe as he thought from danger, discharged his shot-gun in that direction, thinking only to frighten him. It stands to reason that if he had intended to hit him he would have discharged his gun when the culprit was in sight instead of waiting until he was protected by the tree: unfortunately Newcomin carelessly exposed a part of his shoulder at the moment of discharge, and a few shot struck him there. He began howling and yelling with all his might, upon which poor Billington fearing he was badly wounded, threw down his gun and hastened to his aid, more frightened at his unfortunate shot than the victim.



He assisted him home, helped to dress the wound, and acknowledged the act, <sup>with</sup> much mortification & sorrow. Even so unfavorable an expositor as Hubbard, admits that in deciding the case "they relied upon the voluntary submission of the offender." There was no witness against him but himself. He was completely broken down with grief and remorse at the sad effect of his experiment.

How long a time elapsed after the wound before Newcomin died is not stated. It may have been a week, or a month, or even more. The death could only have resulted from the wounded man's carelessness. A few bird shot in a man's shoulder would never be considered a mortal wound! Something other than the wound must evidently <sup>have</sup> caused the death. Yet if the man did actually die from the wound and nothing else, even then it could only be considered an accidental homicide. for if murder was intended, every opportunity was offered to





complete it while the victim was helpless, and at his mercy. This is the whole statement of the reputed crime, in a nut shell. What was the result? Here was the opportunity for his long waiting enemy, or enemies as the case may be, to glut their ire, and they did so.

There are but two statements by eye witnesses, of the execution or the events that led up to it. One by Gov. Bradford - the other by Thomas Morton. The latter is an impartial account. He had no reason to love Billington, for he was Capt. Staudish's right-hand man at the capture of Morton and the destruction of his property - Morton's book is one of the curiosities of literature, full of nic-names, & a play upon words and prosous names. He calls Billington "Old Woodman", from his love of the woods and hunting.

On page 84 of his book, in giving an account of the minerals found in New England, particularly a state or grind-stone that Billington had found on Richmond's island



Maine during one of his fishing trips Eastward.

Morton writes: "There is a very useful Stone in the  
 "Land, and as yet there is found out but one place in  
 "where they may be had in the country. Old Woodman  
 " (that was hoked at Plymouth after he had played the  
 " unhappy marksman when he was pursued by a careless  
 " fellow that was new come into the Land) they say labored  
 " to get a pattent of it to himself. He was beloved by many,  
 " and had many sons that had a mind to digress that commodity "

This testimony of Morton gives some idea of the  
 extenuating circumstances of the case. That "he was be-  
 loved by many" is shown by the gift of Land from  
 John Cannon & Thomas Tench on their decease, and  
 from the strenuous objections of the minority, to the execution.

It would seem also that his free open confession  
 before alluded to, should be set down in his favor. He  
 made no attempt at concealment, it was contrary to his  
 nature to do so. Openness & candor, even in blunder, mark an honest man.



Here follows Mr Bradford's statement written twenty years after the tragedy. "This year [1630] John Billington ye elder, one that came over with the first, was arraigned, and both by grand and petit jurie found guilty of wilful murder, by plaine and notorious evidence, and was for the same accordingly executed. He and some of his had often <sup>been</sup> punished for miscarriages before, being one of the most profaneest families amongst them. This fact was that he waylaid a young man one John Newcomein about a former quarrel, and shot him with a gun when of he died." The plaine & notorious evidence was Billingtons word = nothing more. The assertion about "he and some of his" is entirely false. There never was any charge made against him, nor was he ever punished; neither was any of his punished. The son Francis was fined for smoking on the street, but it was after his fathers death. He paid the fine that ended it. These statements show Bradfords indifference to facts.



That he waylaid Newcomin is disputed by Morton & others. Morton says "he was persued by a careless fellow" Hubbard Goodwin & others, although strongly and bitterly prejudiced against Billington, disagree with Bradford. Hubbard writes <sup>& That Newcomin hid behind a tree</sup> <sup>bitter</sup> That they met accidentally in the field, Goodwin the most and false of any defamer, occupying a whole chapter in suspicious and falsifications admits with others that Newcomin was hid behind a tree when ~~the~~ that was made.

It is not unnatural that extreme defenders of Bradford should present inventions of various kinds, but the truth in the end will prevail over fiction, however skillfully fabricated — Bradfords enmity to Billington is exhibited very plainly in many places in his manuscript — here is a specimen, In a letter to Cushman June 9 1625 he writes "Billington still rails at you, and threatens to arrest you. He is a knave & so will live & die," why was Billington singled out in that manner when the whole colony was railing at Cushman for good reasons?





Goodwin's violent tirades in relation to the  
 family of Francis Billington, with a pen dipped  
 in gall should not escape our notice. He is  
 not satisfied with his invectives against the Eld-  
 -er Billington and his wife, but turns hisartil-  
 -lery against against the modest quiet son  
 Francis and his family. Francis Billington  
 was one of the foremost men in the colony in emer-  
 -gy, in intellect, in morals, in industry and in  
 financial success. He was one of the promoters  
 and managers of the company that purchased  
 and settled the town of Middleboro; he paid  
 the next highest tax to Mrs and Jonathan Brewster,  
 Step. Hopkins and Robert Hix. These four paying  
 the highest tax in town. He was not only steady,  
 industrious and thrifty himself, but brought up his  
 family in like <sup>manner</sup>. The boys were apprenticed to trades,  
 and the girls instructed in proper acquirements. Yet <sup>says</sup>



Goodwin on page 344, "They were a thriftless pair, and were forced to bind out most or all their children!" He devotes one whole chapter in striving to place this family in a false light to the world. It would have been greatly to Goodwin's reputation if he had left the story of the Billingtons entirely alone, and we may say the same of his sister Jane Goodwin Austen. They are not aware that they are attempting to smother their own pedigree. Francis Billington had 9 children, some writers give him ten or eleven. His direct descendants & connections are numbered by millions, from the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court down to Saml'a Bradford; including the descendants of every one of the "May Flower" passengers who left issue. If any one of these is inclined to throw mud at the innocent Billington, he bespatters one of his great grand sires, who cannot now return the compliment. And the attack is a very mean trick.



Investigations of recent years have been made and published in relation to this reputed crime of Billington, which have established the fact, that at the most, it was but an accidental homicide. To very many, if they read between the lines, it will be considered not even a homicide but a natural death through a man's own carelessness. Hon. George C. Burgess, in a paper lately read before The "May-Flower" society of Boston (1900) enters largely into a discussion of this subject, throwing much light, where there has been for nearly three hundred years darkness and error. It convinced most of his hearers that a very grave crime was committed by the "deep damnation of Billington's taking off". Complimentary notices of his paper were published, some of which, with other printed articles on Billington, are pasted in this book, it is regretted that more of these newspaper cuttings have not been preserved.

Burgess' explanation of many of Bradford's acts attracted close attention, especially the fact that Bradford had finished



his written manuscript, omitting intentionally any notice of one of the most remarkable incidents of the colony; but in 1650, finding his connection with that tragedy was receiving so much attention and censure, he turned back and on the blank side of the leaf <sup>pg 180</sup> (at that date, 1630) inserted the laconic notice we have quoted above - an *ex-parte* statement.

Another Temple vail was rent in twain!  
 Angels gazed in heart-felt woe  
 On man's base inhumanity again!  
 It was near three hundred years ago.

Stretch'd on a cart the poor old man was drawn  
 His wrists in iron fetters bled  
 A haug-mans cap was the crown of poorne  
 On the gray old Pilgrimes head.





He braved the boisterous waves for freedom's life  
 With other noble Braves in valiant strife.  
 He lived a life of toil, and constant care -  
 Worked the sandy soil, and breathed the air  
 Of woods and glens; impelled by heart of oak  
 Where other souls had quailed and promise broke.  
 He heeded not the shaft - The bark of scorn  
 His enemies had cast; for he was borne  
 Of sterner rank and blood. His sons have "held  
 The fort" - withstood the flood on Bunker Hill -  
 In every glorious war or strife for home,  
 Where Freedom's shining star has ever shone.  
 In fetters bound they led him out to die  
 The stricken wife stood gasping sigh on sigh  
 The only son was dumb with silent grief  
 The choking sobs and moans, his sole relief.  
 The victim's eye beamed sadly cool and mild.  
 His weeping wife he kiss'd, and hug'd his child,  
 And said "Look to her, Francis; watch her well,  
 What balm can heal her mind, no one can tell.  
 Pray for her mind and health; pray Christians, pray.  
 And for myself, speak kindly when you may."



(One of the mysteries attending this unfortunate execution which has been commented <sup>upon</sup> by various writers, is the coercy and silence of the actors in the tragedy! There seems to have been an understanding that, as the error had occurred, and a grievous wrong done, all further allusion to it should cease. G. W. Bradford does not even allude to it at the time in his journal, nor of any letters or verbal strictures of his <sup>own</sup> acts in the case, made by Dr. Fuller and others, Dr. Fuller was absent in Boston on his errand of mercy when the execution occurred. Several of his letters to Bradford at that time were preserved, but all those referring to Billington are missing - fortunately the following draft of one from Elder Brewster survived the "crumbling touch of time" like the "Brewster Book" The only item from Bradford's pen was made in his journal twenty years after the ~~the~~ event; the reason of its being then mentioned has been spoken of on page 24 (Remarks on Gov. C. Burgess' address on Billington) Elder Brewster's letter, after ~~after~~ mentioning some church matters continues thus -

"Pray let us not be too hasty in our condemnation of this old man. Does he not merit our forbearance and our sympathy, yea and our love? I have not forgotten, if you have, his helpfull loving hand extended to our sick and dying, ten years ago - side by side, and hand in hand with me he toiled day after day, and far into the night to keep the fluttering life into those who were homing at death's door, bringing from the woods the fruits of his gun and traps - or up from the salt-sea his burden of fish, clams, &c which were prepared for food by the kind hand of his wife, our loving sister in christ, who is soon to become a widow and her only son, fatherless! Remember who it was that said - 'inasmuch as you have done - &c'. I can truly say - and you can scarcely deny that but for the loving kindness of this man, our little band would have all perished, and the wolves gathred on our bones. Look into those kind blue eyes



overflowing with grief, and remember that in all these ten eventful years  
his life has been unblemished, and as his tongue has never uttered a  
falseness, should we not believe him when he declares in his broken sobbing  
voice; "I have no fears of death - no longing for a lingering life, for my years  
are well nigh spent, but to die such a death - to leave behind me such a name  
is a terror and a dread. I must insist that I am innocent of any attempt at murder.  
I would rather bleed at every pore than willingly put my most savage enemy to  
death. I could <sup>not</sup> wish that any 'one should be killed, even though he had done me  
the foulest wrong. This man was in the act of robbing me of my hard earned <sup>property</sup>  
but I had no wish or intention to harm a hair of his head. I thought only to fight <sup>him</sup>  
for his crime, and the good god only knows how I have suffered for my mistaken  
shot, and its fatal result!"

Now brother Bradford - you and I are friends and have been friends for  
many years, and I must speak plainly to you who have this man's life in your hands.  
If it is - as you know has been broadly hinted - that you have nourished <sup>hatred</sup> in your heart  
all these years for a little joke that Billington played on you some ten years ago,  
you are doing not only him, but yourself a most grievous wrong. [This allusion  
was to the incident that occurred on the shores of Cape Cod see page 21]

Billington's life must have had many other earnest pleaders, for Houston, the only  
other contemporary writer who mentions Billington's taking off, says that "he had  
many friends".



*Old Colony Memorial May 13, 1886.*

**John Billington.**

"The evil that men do lives after them,  
The good is oft inter'd with their bones."

This declaration was never more applicable than in the case of the person whose name stands at the head of this communication.

John Billington with his wife Eleanor, and his two boys John and Francis, came over in the *Mayflower* in 1620. They were from London, and, although not members of the Puritan Church, or what could be strictly called "religious", they cast their lot in with the first Pilgrim emigrants. They possessed more worldly goods than most of their associates, and built one of the seven dwelling houses that were erected the first Winter. The father had inherited from his ancestors a stout robust frame, which, with a pliable bodily vigor, the result of temperate living, constant exercise and a cheerful disposition, he transmitted to his two boys. The exuberant spirits, and overflow of animal life led these boys sometimes into mischiefs, which, to the staid Pilgrims, were perhaps annoying. The following incident is from "Mourt's Relation." The *Mayflower* then lying at anchor in Cape Cod harbor December 1st.

"This day, we, through God's mercy escaped a great danger by the foolishness of a boy, one of John Billington's sons, who in his father's absence, had got gunpowder, and had shot off a piece or two, and made squibs; and there being a fowling piece charged in his father's cabin, shot her off in the cabin, there being a little barrel of powder half full scattered in and about the cabin—and many people about the fire, and yet by God's mercy no harm done."

At another time the boy "John, Jr." got into some mischief and upon the captain's reproving him, he retaliated with some indecorous remark "whereupon he was punished

by having his head and heels tied together."

As may well be supposed these boys, as well as their father, were fond of hunting, fishing and other exhilarating out door sports. On the last of July 1621, the boy "John, Jr." during one of his adventurous hunting trips, as related by Bradford, "got lost in the woods and after five days wandering about in the wilderness, living upon berries and what he could find, came upon an Indian village called "Manamet", twenty miles to the south of Plymouth. The natives took him prisoner and conveyed him across the bay to "Nawsett", but Massasoit, learning his destiny, sent word to the English where he was, and they sent a sheriff after him and he was given up."

Bradford again says, "On the 8th of May, 1621, the youngest boy Francis, having the week before on one of his hunting trips seen from the top of a high tree on a high hill a great sea, proceeded to explore it more fully. He found it divided into two great lakes, the bigger of them five or six miles in circuit, and in it an isle of a cable length square, the other three miles in compass; they are fine fresh water, full of fish and fowl; a brook issues from it; it will be an excellent help for us in time."

Davis says, "John Billington, Jr., died soon after 1627, and Francis has given his name perpetual distinction by the discovery of 'Billington Sea.'"

During the terrible scourge that carried off one half of the little band of Pilgrims the first Winter, John Billington and his family were among the seven persons who escaped the pestilence. They, with Elder Brewster, Myles Standish and Doctor Fuller were the only ones able to administer help to the sufferers. During all this deadly, loathsome malady, John Billington and his family devoted their time and risked their lives to help their sick and suffering neighbors without a thought that there was any wonderful hero-





sm in such noble devotion and self-denying sacrifices. It was a pure labor of love. It was the result of those noblest human instincts, heartfelt sympathy and kindly feelings which prevailed their very natures and served them instead of the professional piety and devotional religion which they lacked.

In giving an account of that terrible loathsome sickness and scurvy the first Winter, Gov. Bradford wrote "of one hundred and odd persons, scarce fifty remained alive, and of these in ye time of most distress, there was but six or seven sound persons, who to their great commendation be it spoken, spared no pains, night nor day, but with abundance of toyle and hazzard of their own health, fetched them wood, made their fires, dressed them meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them; in a word did all ye homly and necessarie offices for them wch dainty and querie stomachs cannot endure to hear named; and all this willingly and cheerfully without any grudging in the least, showing herein their true love unto their friends and bretherin, a rare example and worthy to be remembered."

Billington's kind offices to the sick and suffering, met with a marked token of acknowledgment later from William Tench and John Carver, who came in the "Fortune" 1621. They were tenderly nursed and cared for by Billington during a tedious sickness, and on their decease bequeathed to him their land and all their worldly goods. I have been thus particular in noting a few of John Billington's good acts that were "buried with his bones" and the memory of them almost forgotten, while the one unfortunate evil act of his life will live forever, magnified and unextenuated.

The story according to family tradition, briefly told is this.

Billington, while hunting, accidentally met Newcomb, who manifested so much fear and cowardice at the encounter, that he betrayed his feelings by dodging behind trees and stumps; his trepidation amused Billington, and in order to frighten the man still more, he wrongfully, but without any murderous intention, when he saw his antagonist safely ensconced behind a tree, raised his gun and fired. It was a most sad and unfortunate sportive jest, the man at that moment exposed his shoulder, and the shot struck and ~~he~~ wounded him. Billington called to persons near by, and together they carried the man home. He died declaring that Billington killed him, and giving his version of the transaction.

Appearances certainly were against Billington, and what was worse for him, he made no excuses to his accusers, remaining sullen and silent on account of his self-condemnation and self-arraignment. His sorrow and remorse grew upon him; was overpowering and crushing in its weight. He felt that his doom was sealed; that he merited death, as the only expiation for his crime, and that it would be a sweet rest to his perturbed spirit; the luxury of a "kind nepenthe." There were a few who plead for mercy, and the case was referred to the decision of the Massachusetts Colonists, who had just arrived at Boston. They decided in accordance with Indian justice of "blood for blood." The verdict in these days could only have been for "manslaughter" or "accidental homicide."

He was executed about Sept. or October, 1630. The date is uncertain, and contradictory, as are the different versions of the pretended trial. Very little has come down to us save the one-sided and partial account given by his judges and executioners. The Pilgrim fathers were good noble men, but



stern and unyielding in their prejudices and judgments, particularly in regard to those whom they considered "ungodly," and according to their testimony, poor John Billington was a profane" man, and like Lyford and Oldham met their displeasure. The following is Gov. Bradford's account. He was Governor at the time of the execution. "This yr' (1630) John Billington ye elder, one that came over with the first, was arraigned, and both by grand and petie jurie found guilty of willful murder by plain and notorious evidence, and was for the same accordingly executed. He and some of his had been often punished for miscariages before, being one of the profanest families amongst them. This facte was that he way-laid a young man, one John New-comin, about a former quarrel, and shot him with a gun, whereof he dyed."

This account was written in 1650, and differs materially from the account given by William Hubbard, only twenty years later. He says: "About Sept. 1st, in the year 1630, was one Billington executed at Plymouth for murther,—who maliciously slew his neighbor in the field as he accidentally met him, as himself was going to shoot deer. The poor fellow, perceiving the intent of Billington, his mortal enemy, sheltered himself behind trees as well as he could for a while; but the other, not being so ill a marksman as to miss his aim, made a shot at him and struck him on the shoulder, with which he died soon after." Bradford, it will be seen, says that he "way-laid" him; while Hubbard admits that he "met him accidentally."

There is a very true saying that "conscience makes cowards of us all." As some strictures were made upon this hasty trial and execution, the actors in the drama felt compelled to make the culprit and his crime appear as odious as possible, in hopes thus to shield themselves from any charge of haste or illegality. Hence the unjust and unnecessary aspersions, and the uncharitable remarks that were appended to their statements of the tragedy many years after the event; and which embellishments have been repeated by subsequent writers until perhaps the truth can now never overtake the falsehoods, although it would seem but charitable and certainly legal, in these enlightened days, to give the unfortunate man the benefit of the doubt.

He was an industrious, hard working man, and had accumulated perhaps a larger amount of property than most of his neighbors. His homestead property was at Playne dealing and is now owned by the heirs of the late Thomas Jackson. His original lot of three acres was south of the Town Brook, between Sandwich Street and the harbor. Two acres of his land north of the present railroad enclosure bordered upon the land of Gov. Bradford. This lot the widow sold to Gov. Prince in 1638. His lands beyond High Cliff are now a part of the lands of the Plymouth Cordage Company; the rocks off the shore are yet known as the "Billington rocks."

Francis Billington, the only surviving child, was much like his father in his handsome, massive physique and gentlemanly deportment, though of a less passionate and impulsive nature. He was but twenty-two years of age, and deeply mourned his father's untimely taking-off. He devoted himself to his mother in her heart-stricken grief and desolate home. It was at first grating to his sensitive soul to daily come in contact with the social prejudices and ostracism of the little world about him, and he clung still more lovingly to the woods and lakes and pine-clad hills. He had a few choice friends, the friends of his father,—Elder Brewster, Doctor Fuller and son Samuel, Francis Eaton, John Shaw and some others.

His bosom friend, Francis Eaton, died in 1633, and the next year he married his amiable and accomplished widow, Christian (Penn) Eaton. She had come in the "Ann" in 1623, and became Francis Eaton's third wife in 1626. She carried her loving, sweet-souled influence into the stricken family, and a new life dawned upon them. The mother resided with them until her marriage in 1638 to Gregory Armstrong, having first made over to her son Francis her property. Armstrong died in 1650, leaving Eleanor again a widow. She probably died about 1665, in her eightieth year.

Francis had eight children living in 1650. He was one of the twenty-six original purchasers and settlers in Middleboro in 1600. They were all driven off in 1675, during Phillips' War, and returned again in 1679 with their pastor, Rev. Samuel Fuller, son of Doctor Samuel, one of the Mayflower Pilgrims.



17. 1900  
**JOHN BILLINGTON, THE MARTYR**

The dark mystery that has for nearly three hundred years clouded the story of John Billington's execution is attracting the attention of historical students. Straggling comments have appeared at intervals in the public journals. The paper read by Mr. George C. Burgess Friday last at the meeting of the "Mayflower descendants" at the Vendome was an able exposition, showing very clearly that prejudice and passion were at the bottom of the dark tragedy. That an undisguised enemy of a man should be allowed to act as his accuser and judge shows a condition of society very undesirable, and far removed from justice! Not a word has come down to us referring to the particulars of the execution save from the pen of his enemy.

Thomas Morton is the only other contemporary writer. He gives no particulars, merely saying: "He, when pursued by a careless fellow that was new into the land, played the unhappy marks man," adding: "He was beloved by many." Mr. Burgess gives us in detail the story of Governor Bradford in the premises, and compared it with the embellishments of writers of a later day, whose conflicting descriptions are something marvellous. If they have actually found other authority than Morton and Bradford, they are wrong in not revealing their authority; until they do so we must look upon them as slandering, unwittingly perhaps, a martyr to violence under forms of law. If any of them are, as they contend, descendants of the Mayflower Pilgrims, they must have Billington blood in their veins, gathered from some of the million descendants of Frances Billington's eleven children, who intermarried with the descendants of every one of the Mayflower passengers who left any descendants at Plymouth. One was heard to say that "it was not pleasant, in tracing back our pedigree, to run against one who was hung." This was not a kind remark, nor a happy one. John Brown was hung, "but his soul is marching on," and no patriot would feel unpleasant to trace back to him, or to Nathan Hale, or to the scores who were, all over the Christian land, hung for witches.

Probably the most that would be made today of Billington's "unhappy marksman-ship" would be "accidental homicide," and there are many who would not consider a few shot striking a man in the flesh of his shoulder as a mortal wound. It is far more probable the guilty thief whom Billington accidentally hit as he discharged his gun to frighten him, while hiding behind a tree, died from his own unnecessary negligence and carelessness. That is the view of the scholar in Pilgrim records who first came to the defence of Billington's memory in these columns a few years ago. \*

Meeting of Massachusetts Mayflower Descendants

At Hotel Vendome, yesterday afternoon, a stated meeting of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants took place, Gamaliel Bradford, president of the society, in the chair. The essayist of the afternoon was George C. Burgess, whose subject was "John Billington, a Plymouth Pilgrim." Of the 101 Pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower, John Billington is the only man whose relationship is not sought, because he was guilty of homicide, for which he was executed. The speaker told how the man had been placed in a despicable light by historians. Up to the time of committing the deed, which Mr. Burgess reasoned to be in self-defence, Billington's record is as good as that of any man who came over in the famous old ship. Governor Bradford said the Billingtons were the profanest family among the Pilgrims. Goodwin's history, as well as Bradford's, and Mrs. Austen's novels have placed Billington in an unjustly contemptible light; so much so that those who file applications for membership in the Mayflower society, upon finding a relationship with Billington, withdraw their applications immediately.

Mr. Burgess is prepared to stand, not perhaps as a champion of Billington, but to take a more charitable and just view of his character. He believes that when Governor Bradford referred to him as profane, he merely meant that he was outside of the temple and differed in his religious views from the Puritans. He thinks it probable he was misjudged and was more unfortunate than wicked. "We do not know what defence he might have made, for he was allowed to make none, and his prosecutors were his judges," Mr. Burgess said. There was the usual informal reception, the tea table being prettily decorated with carnations and mayflowers. The pourers were Mrs. Wesson, Mrs. Solon W. Stevens, Miss Allen and Mrs. Francis W. Goss.

\* The Editor here refers to a communication of mine a copy of which I have not been able to secure. But it can be seen in the files of the old Transcript in the Boston Public Library of the date of Jan'y. 5 1898 on page 6. Title is "A Pilgrim's Record" L2























